

# Committee on Resources

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## TESTIMONY OF MIKE HEILIGENSTEIN

### COUNTY COMMISSIONER

### WILLIAMSON COUNTY, TEXAS

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### COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

### SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER AND POWER

### U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I am Mike Heiligenstein and I serve as a County Commissioner in Williamson County, Texas. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on H.R. 1732, the Williamson County Water Recycling Act of 2003. I also want to thank Congressman John Carter for introducing this legislation and Congressman Chet Edwards for cosponsoring. I am proud to have them representing my county in Washington, D.C.

As a County Commissioner in Texas, I and my fellow Commissioners Court members, are the overall governing and management body of the County. The Commissioners Court is responsible for all budgetary decisions and setting the tax rate each year. Commissioners Courts in Texas are also charged by the Legislature to establish a courthouse and jail, build roads and bridges and provide law enforcement through the County Sheriff. Williamson County's general fund budget is in excess of \$66.5 million dollars and the road and bridge fund is in excess of \$10.7 million dollars. While the county has recently been given legislative authority to provide water and wastewater services, it has neither the budget nor technical expertise to effectively provide such services. We do, however, consult frequently with LCRA to be sure that the residents are getting the best water and wastewater service.

Since 1990, Williamson County has experienced phenomenal growth. Williamson County is located just north of Austin and is the home to Dell Computer. According to the 1990 census, there were 139,551 residents in Williamson County. By 2000, that number had grown to 249,967. For that decade, Williamson County was the second fastest growing county in Texas and the 19<sup>th</sup> fastest growing county in the country. Although the growth has slowed recently, population projections still estimate we will have over 750,000 residents by 2025.

The Texas Water Development Board has required all retail water providers to develop Water Conservation and Drought Contingency Plans. All of the water providers in Williamson County have completed and implemented very restrictive water conservation plans. Even so, the current water supplies in Williamson County will be exhausted in 2017. As our population has grown, we have struggled to keep up with the demand for water. Because it is such a scarce and precious resource, we are constantly looking for ways to conserve what sources we have and to plan for the development of additional sources before they are needed.

There have been two major studies completed recently regarding the supply of water to Williamson County. In 1997, the Texas State Legislature determined the need to facilitate long-term water planning throughout the state and approved Senate Bill 1. This statewide effort resulted in fifteen regional water plans being developed. One of those plans, the Region G plan, included detailed evaluations of the 50-year water demands and supplies for Williamson County. This study was partially funded by the Texas Water Development. As I said before, a significant conclusion of that report is that the existing sources of water will be fully utilized in 2017. Possible alternatives to meet the long term water needs of the county include (1) the construction of a new reservoir on the Little River, (2) the development of ground water in an area 50-75 miles east of the county or (3) the inter-basin transfer of additional surface water from the Colorado River to the Brazos River basin. The second study was the Williamson County Water Supply Facilities Plan that was prepared by the Lower Colorado River Authority and the Brazos River Authority. It looked at how best to meet the 50-year needs of

the cities and other retail providers in ten-year increments. Both reports placed significant emphasis on reuse in their water supply calculations. However, so far only three cities in the county have begun reuse projects and with only limited success. This is in part due to the fragmented approach now being taken as well as the high initial cost to implement reuse in Williamson County. The county believes that a significant reuse program can both reduce and postpone the need for development of one or more of these new water supplies. This will have a direct directly impact on every water customer in the county.

There has been a long-term relationship between LCRA and Williamson County because LCRA has been a major power provider for nearly 75 years for much of the county. During the last 10 years, LCRA has also been instrumental in bringing a regional approach to the water and wastewater needs in the county. It is my understanding that LCRA also has a long history of working with the Bureau of Reclamation. We believe that these two organizations can bring a truly regional approach to reuse in Williamson County. The initial infusion of federal funds from the Bureau of Reclamation can jump-start this important program. LCRA's leadership and experience in project management and delivery will insure its long-term success. Since the county has no experience with major water and wastewater projects, we look to LCRA and the Brazos River Authority to provide their expertise to such a project.

The County recently acquired 800 acres for a regional park and has completed the construction of the first phase of its long-term plan for the park. Further development is now limited by the availability of irrigation water. The county now purchases 200,000 gallons per day of drinking water from the City of Round Rock. This contract will expire in 2006. Until a better, more reliable source of water can be developed, the county will be limited in its development of the remainder of the park. The proposed reuse project will provide that new source of irrigation water.

On behalf of the Commissioners Court of Williamson County, I would like to thank the committee for considering this bill. I can also assure you that the cities within Williamson County are aware of this important legislation and wanted me to acknowledge their support. Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me to appear before your committee today. I would be glad to answer any questions at this time.

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